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Alethic Rights and Alethic Pluralism in Libraries

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Abstract: The concept of truth, although unavoidable, is very problematic from a philosophical point of view and, in the field of librarianship, it is even more disputed for various reasons: inapplicability to libraries' collections and reference services; scarcity of resources necessary in the event of a possible application; conflict with the value of intellectual neutrality. The "alethic rights" proposed by D'Agostini in 2017, pertinent to truth claims in social contexts, can be interpreted in two ways: the "strong" way is not applicable to libraries because it would lead to the same problems caused by the research of the truthfulness of each document preserved by libraries and of any information provided by their reference services; the "weak" way would instead be applicable to libraries, but it is more appropriate not to apply this either, both because there would be the risk that it could be interpreted in the strong way, and because its application would still be redundant compared to what already happens in libraries and to what, if necessary, could be obtained in emergency situations by applying instead the principle of social responsibility. In the library field it would be more sensible and useful to apply, instead of alethic rights, the epistemological theory of "alethic pluralism" by Wright (1992). *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press and Lynch (2009). *Truth as One and Many*. Oxford: Clarendon, which defines the concept of truth in a way compatible with technical practices and with deontological rules currently more widespread in libraries.

Keywords: alethic pluralism, alethic rights, Franca D'Agostini, intellectual neutrality, truth

1 Introduction

Two articles (Froehlich 2021; Lor, Wiles, and Britz 2021) recently published in *Libri* took up some themes that, between 2017 and 2019, had been at the center of a wide and heated debate on fake news, post-truth, and intellectual neutrality of librarians that was held on the pages of the Italian library and information sciences journal *AIB studi*.[1] This article would like to contribute at the same time to the ongoing debate in *Libri* and to summarize, for English-speaking readers, what I explained more extensively in Italian on the relevance of the concept of truth for libraries in the context of the original debate that appeared in *AIB studi* (Ridi 2018) and in a subsequent paper (Ridi 2022). I refer to these two articles for more in-depth bibliographic references, for more extensive quotations of relevant texts and for more thorough argumentations, all here reduced to the indispensable minimum.

What I will try to demonstrate here can be summarized as follows: 1) the concept of truth, although unavoidable, is very problematic from a philosophical point of view; 2) in the field of librarianship it is even more disputed for various reasons (inapplicability to libraries' collections and reference services, scarcity of resources in any case necessary in the event of a possible application, conflict with intellectual neutrality); 3) the "alethic rights" theorized by the Italian philosopher Franca D'Agostini (2017) can be interpreted in two ways: the "strong" way is not applicable to libraries because it would lead to the same problems caused by the research, in libraries, of the truthfulness of each document preserved and of any information provided by the reference services; 4) the "weak" way would instead be applicable, in theory, but it is more appropriate not to apply this either, both because there would be the risk that it could be interpreted in the strong way, and because its application would still be redundant compared to what already happens in libraries and to what, if necessary, could be obtained in emergency situations by applying instead the principle of social responsibility, already present in many deontological codes of librarians; 5) in the library field it would be more sensible and useful to apply, instead of

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1 Issues involved were: *AIB studi* 57 (1) (2017), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/797 (an article by Karolina Andersdotter); *AIB studi* 57 (3) (2017), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/799 (an article by Vittorio Ponzani); *AIB studi* 58 (1) (2018), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/828 (articles by Paul Gabriele Weston with Anna Galluzzi, by Giorgio Antoniacomi, and by Gino Roncaglia); *AIB studi* 58 (2) (2018), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/829 (articles by Karen Coyle and by Matilde Fontanin); *AIB studi* 58 (3) (2018), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/830 (articles by Andrea Zanotti and by Riccardo Ridi); *AIB studi* 59 (1–2) (2019), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/1803 (a further article by Giorgio Antoniacomi); *AIB studi* 59 (3) (2019), https://aibstudi.aib.it/issue/view/1166 (an article by Federico Meschini).

alethic rights, the epistemological theory of "alethic pluralism" by English philosopher Crispin Wright (1992) and American philosopher Michael Lynch (2009), which defines the concept of truth in a way compatible with technical practices and with deontological rules currently more widespread in libraries.

2 The Concept of Truth

The most ancient philosophical theory on the concept of truth (called "realist" or "correspondence") dates back to Plato and Aristotle, and dominated the philosophical debate at least until the end of the eighteenth century (Blackburn 2018, 15–24; David 2015; Dowden 2022; Volpe 2012, 25–47). One of its best-known formulations is that of Thomas Aquinas, according to which "truth is the adjustment of the thing and of the mind," that is, in more modern terms, "a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a real fact" and, therefore, the statement "the snow is white" can be considered true only if the snow is actually white. This might sound rather trivial, but over the centuries logicians and philosophers made numerous criticisms of this position. First of all, facts and propositions are radically different entities, and therefore any alleged "correspondence" or "adjustment" between them risks turning out to be simply a tautology, a linguistic convention or even an absurdity. Furthermore, there are metaphysical theories and philosophical orientations that even question the objective existence of something like single facts, clearly separable from the overall reality (holism) or from their linguistic description (a perspective common to all analytic philosophy) or from our own perception of reality itself (phenomenalism). Then there are certain types of propositions (such as, for example, those concerning ethics) for which it is not at all clear what the corresponding facts are. Finally, the ancient skeptics already underlined the regress that occurs every time that, to establish the truthfulness of any proposition, we will necessarily have to make observations, measurements, and reasonings, all expressed by other propositions, the truthfulness of which will have to be further ascertained through other observations, measurements, and reasoning, and so on *ad infinitum*.

In order to try to overcome these objections, other theories (technically defined as "antirealist" or "epistemic") on the nature of the concept of truth were proposed. Among them we must remember at least those of pragmatism and coherentism, both fully formalized towards the end of the nineteenth century. Pragmatism (Capps 2019; Caputo 2015, 63–68) was born with the thesis of Charles S. Peirce that supporting the truthfulness of a proposition means being willing to act accordingly to it, subsequently radicalized by William James, for whom something is true because it is useful, and not something is useful because it is true, and even all eternal truths, such as the mathematical ones, are linguistically constructed, for reasons of usefulness and practical expediency. For coherentism (Blackburn 2018, 25–36; Capps 2018), on the other hand, the only (or, at least, the main) criterion really available to establish the truthfulness of a single statement is the consistency with respect to a wider set of propositions and, at the limit, to the entire human knowledge.

Deflationism (Armour-Garb and Woodbridge 2021; Caputo 2015, 124–154; Volpe 2012, 98–116), which developed during the twentieth century to seek further solutions to the logical problems that even antirealist positions faced, consists of a family of theories that have in common the belief that truthfulness is not a truly substantial or essential property of propositions or thoughts. For example, for the "redundancy theory" there is no difference between saying "it is true that the snow is white" or, more simply, "the snow is white", with the use of the first expression motivated exclusively by the emphasis that you want to attribute to it. On the other hand, for the "disquotational theory" and for "minimalism" the concept of truth serves only to simplify the language, in the first case by "removing the quotation marks" in propositions relating to other propositions which are however logically equivalent to simpler and more direct propositions relative to facts, and in the second case summing up with expressions such as "everything I told you this morning is still true" the long repetition of all the propositions I had already uttered a few hours ago.

Although deflationism was sometimes described as a theory of the "disappearance" or the "superfluity" of truth (D'Agostini 2011, 77–79), it must still be clearly distinguished from the defense of the so-called "post-truth." Deflationism is a coherent and sophisticated argumentation of the futility of defining the linguistic propositions as "true", but it certainly does not support the irrelevance of the facts that make propositions truthful or to which, in any case, they refer. The speeches in favor of post-truth – a journalistic trend which exploded in 2016 and unfortunately has not yet completely waned (Bufacchi 2021) – are often only concise and ambiguous slogans not argued, interpretable, at best, as alarms on the spread of fake news (post-truth in the weak sense) or, at worst, as absurd claims that it does not matter any longer whether the snow actually is – or appears – white or black (post-truth in the strong sense) (Ridi 2018).

In any case, denying the existence of any type or form of truth is self-contradictory, and therefore impossible if you want to remain within the very possibility of a minimally rational and coherent communication. To prevent this denial is the so-called "indispensability argument," as old as philosophy itself, which consists simply in asking those who argue that the truth does not exist or, in any case, is not knowable, if at least this "assertion is true or not. If it is true, obviously for who is arguing there is at least some truth, and it is knowable; if it is not true, then you do not see why you should accept it and why the arguing, the nihilist, supports it" (D'Agostini 2012, 29). A recent, ironic, confirmation of this self-confutation of the deniers of the concept of truth is also provided by Donald Trump himself, whose impudent statements inspired those who coined the term "post-truth" but who today, having to choose a name to baptize his new social media platform, opts precisely for "Truth social" (Gabbatt 2022).

3 Truth in Libraries

Paradoxical as it may seem, truth is not a particularly central concept in library life, so much that, according to Dabney (1991, 377), "one of the most defining aspects of librarianship is that it refuses to hold itself responsible for the truth." Indeed, attributing too much importance to it could even be harmful for the performance of the technical functions of libraries and dangerous for the respect of the ethical values of librarians. The reasons are various, and the first one concerns the collections.

If librarians assign too much relevance to the truthfulness of the documents they select, store, organize, and make available to their users, considering this characteristic indispensable in order to be part of the collections of the libraries they manage, they would also expect it from types of documents to which it cannot be attributed or, at least, for which it can take very different forms. How is the truthfulness of a science fiction novel, of a comic book or of a philosophical theory verified? Are the *Bible*, the *Odyssey*, the *Magna Carta*, the *Mein Kampf*, a collection of applicable laws and any scientific book published more than 50 years ago truthful or not? And what does it mean to ask if the contents of an instrumental jazz CD or of a DVD of a Fellini's movie are true or false?

A hypothetical library that does not want to host any document that cannot be certified as truthful in the strict sense would risk losing a large part of its collections, for example renouncing to almost all fiction, poetry, and music; to all scientific and technical literature not updated to the latest discoveries, including – so to speak – the naturalistic works of Aristotle and Newton; to all not very recent geographic maps and tourist guides; to all religious texts, or at least to those of all religions except the one that librarians believe to be true; to all works of psychoanalysis (according to some) and to all those of astrology (according to many); to most of the pages of newspapers and current affairs and politics magazines, full of imaginative statements and reports; to any form of advertising and propaganda publishing, including the institutional one; to the chapters of history books containing transcriptions and translations of the *Donation of Constantine* and of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; and the list could go on and on.

Truthfulness is therefore not particularly relevant for the selection of most of the documents that librarians decide to acquire and keep. But also for the selection of documents with respect to which the truthfulness could be more pertinent (mainly recent non-fiction, especially in the more strictly scientific fields), the most common evaluation grids (Fenner 2004; Gregory 2019; Whittaker 1982) do not mention it among the necessary or advisable requirements, preferring other characteristics that are less demanding from the points of view of technical verifiability and of epistemological prudence, such as authenticity, accuracy, precision, correctness, completeness, consistency, validity, updating, reliability, trustworthiness, credibility, reputation or authority. So much so that there are those who even argued that "truth may be, must be, an absolute criterion under the law, but it has no such place in the selection, classification, storage and weeding decisions made by librarians" (Swan 1986, 46).

There are also particular types of libraries in which the discretionality of librarians in deciding which documents to include in the collections is significantly reduced due to certain "automatisms" active in the context of acquisitions. For example, national libraries have the right and the duty to keep every bibliographic document published in a specific country, and academic libraries must acquire all the documents that professors and researchers consider indispensable for teaching and studying. In such cases, neither the truthfulness nor other characteristics of the information content of the documents themselves are relevant for the purposes of acquisition.

Truthfulness is not strictly essential, in libraries, not even in reference services, because librarians know well that when faced with questions such as "is the content of this article really true?" or "could you point me to a book that tells the truth on this subject?" the naivety of the dry answer should be avoided, and a better solution is to help users to learn how to move with competence and autonomy

among the more or less reliable knowledge sources and, in particular, among those mediated by bibliographic tools. On the contrary, only to "internal" questions such as "do you have this journal?", "which books by this author do you own?", "will you be open tomorrow?" or "how does the loan work here?" it will be possible (and necessary) to provide truthful answers.

In any case, neither before buying a book nor before providing information "about the outside world" to a user would it make sense to require librarians to personally verify their truthfulness, re-performing mathematical calculations, repeating chemical experiments and replicating geographical explorations described or implied therein. On the other hand, even outside the library there are very few truths of which we have direct personal certainty, and we manage to survive only thanks to a complex social network for transmitting trust in the knowledge of which others have ascertained the truth or, at least, the probability (Sloman and Fernbach 2018; Wilson 1983). Because, basically, both at the level of personal beliefs and scientific theories, what is most often affirmed is not the absolute certainty of a particular proposition, but a certain degree of probability that it reflects the reality; and probability is even more difficult than certainty to ascertain and measure objectively. Anyway, even if it made sense for librarians to attempt such assessments and measurements, with what human and financial resources could they realistically tackle this immense task? With what disciplinary and linguistic skills? How fast? And, with regard to the collections only: by repeating how often the verification that the documents are – in the light of new scientific discoveries and social changes – still truthful?; how will the work be divided among all the libraries of the world so as not to duplicate it unnecessarily?; and how to behave, once an untruthful document is identified?; destroy it?; correct it?; mark it as inaccurate, erroneous or fraudulent?; segregate it in a *enfer* (Moore 2012) with restricted access?

In addition to all these technical problems, there is also an ethical one: the conflict between the claim to truthfulness and the principle of intellectual neutrality (Scott and Saunders 2021; Wenzler 2019), included in many librarians' codes of conduct (Gębołyś and Tomaszczyk 2012; IFLA 2022). This principle requires librarians to disregard, during any phase or aspect of their professional activity, their own political, religious, and moral opinions and orientations, in order to guarantee the utmost impartiality with respect to the points of view contained in the documents handled and expressed by the users served. It constitutes a fundamental – if not indispensable – premise of what, in turn, is the value of library ethics most shared (and considered the most important) by the professional community, namely the obligation to guarantee equal (i.e. without discriminating against any user) and universal (i.e. without censoring any document) access to all publicly available (i.e. made voluntarily public by the respective authors) information. Nevertheless, intellectual neutrality is the most controversial principle among the values of the professional ethics of librarians, because there are those who believe that social responsibility towards other values widespread in the community of reference of the library (such as, for example, the respect for the law or the protection of public health) should even prevail over the right of access to information in the event of a conflict between them. And there are also those who consider true neutrality to be something impossible, which often hides a tacit adherence to the values of the ruling power and the interests of the mainstream market, which librarians should, on the contrary, try to rebalance. This is not the place to investigate these objections, nor their counter-objections, which I have already analyzed elsewhere (Ridi 2011, 2014, 2018). Here it is sufficient to point out that *if* it is believed that intellectual neutrality is an important ethical value for the library profession, *then* introducing truthfulness among the values of this profession could create problems, because librarians could be tempted not to buy books requested by their users or not to help the users themselves to find certain sources of information if such books and such sources contain data or opinions that librarians believe to be untrue, as it could easily happen, for example, for controversial issues such as creationism, holocaust denial or adverse effects of vaccines. But, in reality, no subject would be truly immune to potential censorship: why the immaculate conception should be considered truer than flat earth theories, christianity less fanciful than scientology, and the statements of a recent U.S. president more reliable than those of any pub braggart?

From an ethical point of view, it should also be noted that not even librarians' ethical codes that do not explicitly adopt intellectual neutrality recommend the complete truthfulness of all documents and information provided by libraries to their users. Among the very few exceptions is the Russian code, which recommends that librarians do "not promote inaccurate, false materials, aware of the danger and the harm they can cause the individual and society" (RLA 2011). However, I believe that Lor (2020) is doing well – although he considers this intent "laudable" – also judging it "potentially problematic," asking himself "who decides what the values of 'society' are?" This is an even more topical and burning question after a Russian law introduced, in March 2022, prison terms of up to 15 years for

journalists who fail to report "the truth" about Russian federation's military operations in Ukraine, prohibiting the use of the words "war" and "invasion" to describe them (Simon 2022).

Regarding the importance of the concept of truth for libraries, the position of Froehlich (2021) is very different from the one exposed so far. He limits himself, hastily, to affirm that "truth has always been a concern in libraries, disagreeing to some extent with Ridi when Ridi claims that truth is not a relevant concept for librarians […]. Truth is a factor in collection decisions and the use of or supply of resources in response to a reference question" (Froehlich 2021, 220), completely ignoring argumentations and testimonies adduced to support the irrelevance in question, and therefore avoiding criticizing or refuting them analytically.

Froehlich (2021) also believes that instances of truth are widely present in librarians' ethical codes, but the only example he gives is the first article in the American library association's *Library bill of rights*, which recommends that "books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves" (ALA 2019), although Froehlich himself admits that this creates an "ambiguity" or "tension" (Froehlich 2021, 220) with other principles of the same codes, such as the second article of the same *Bill of rights*, for which "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (ALA 2019). Froehlich's argumentation, rather weak in my opinion, is based entirely on the term "enlightenment", which he believes would imply that whoever supplies it would be "doing something beneficial (i.e., materials to provide intellectual and/or emotional growth)" (Froehlich 2021, 221) and which, therefore, must necessarily be truthful. But, even leaving aside the juxtaposition (in the *Bill of rights*) of "enlightenment" with "information" and "interest" (different needs, some of which could very well be satisfied even by documents that are neither truthful nor beneficial), it remains to be proved both that no enlightenment can ever arise from involuntarily erroneous or deliberately untruthful documents (which, on the other hand, can very well occur, especially by combining them with other documents that comment on them or contextualize them or with the explanations of a good teacher) and to provide someone a not truthful document can never represent a beneficial action (which instead occurs every time the user needs a book that must necessarily read or even consult quickly – for example for study or work reasons – even if it turns out that its content is inaccurate, incomplete, biased or false). Moreover, fiction and poetry books, theatrical plays and philosophical texts, movies and symphonies might not perhaps provoke at least an "emotional growth" (but sometimes even an intellectual one) even if it does not make much sense to classify them as truthful or not? Finally, the *Bill of rights* does not actually prescribe at all that libraries directly provide any enlightenment to their users (as Froehlich assumes, with a not argued logical leap), but only "books and other resources", which in turn, if anything, only if they are well chosen and in conjunction with numerous other factors, will perhaps be able to satisfy, obtain or provoke "the interest, information, and enlightenment" of users.

4 Alethic Pluralism

Alethic pluralism (Caputo 2015, 165–173; Edwards 2022; Pedersen and Wright 2018; Volpe 2012, 121–135) is a further "very plausible and rather attractive hypothesis" (D'Agostini 2011, 93) that emerged from the Nineties of the twentieth century to try to overcome, or at least to reduce, the numerous objections to which all previous theories on the nature of truth (some of which have been summarized in the second paragraph of this article) continue to be subject to, even in their more recent and sophisticated versions. What all the various versions of alethic pluralism have in common is the thesis that the concept of truth must be interpreted in partially different ways depending on the context of application. The possible truthfulness of propositions such as "the snow is white", "2 + 2 = 4", "Faust sold his soul to Mephistophilis", and "torture is immoral", while sharing some characteristics, would differ however in others, which would prevent us from analyzing them all in the same way and which would explain the difficulties previously encountered by philosophy in identifying a single, all-encompassing definition of truth.

For radical alethic pluralism, theorized by Wright (1992), truthfulness is not a single property attributable to propositions, because the expression "it is true" has different meanings (and therefore corresponds to different properties) in different contexts. To prevent these meanings from diverging excessively, straying too far from the intuition of common sense on what it means "to be true", Wright identifies some fixed points on the concept of truth that still remain in each of the properties referable to it, including the equivalence between a proposition and the assertion that such a proposition is true ("the snow is white" is equivalent to "it is true that the snow is white") and the distinction between the truth of a proposition and its justification (it could be true that the snow is white even

if personally I have neither experiences nor reasonings that lead me to believe it). The more moderate "alethic functionalism" proposed by Lynch (2009) tries to dampen further the risk of shattering the concept of truth into a myriad of completely independent meanings by specifying further "fixed points" (including that of normativity, for which we should believe only to propositions that we consider true) and by returning to the traditional conception for which truthfulness is a single property, which however manifests itself differently in different contexts through a plurality of further properties.

What unites the positions of Wright (1992) and Lynch (2009) is the thesis that the concept of truth is articulated in a central nucleus of general meaning that is difficult or perhaps even impossible to define and in an external surface formed by a series of more specific meanings, only sometimes identified with different terms, applicable only to certain contexts and, within these limits, more easily definable. Another important feature of all versions of alethic pluralism is that they make it possible to recover many classical definitions of truth (such as, for example, those of realism, pragmatism, and coherentism) which had been convincingly criticized in their claims to explain the truthfulness of each type of proposition, but which could still be usable if applied only to propositions of a certain area. For example, the correspondence with experimental data could turn out to be a more adequate criterion of truthfulness for the propositions of physics, while the propositions of mathematics could be more plausibly verified with consistency criteria and those of medicine with pragmatic methods.

The interpretation of the concept of truth offered by alethic pluralism is particularly suitable to be applied in the library field, because it allows to translate into this context the excessive claim of a "classic" or "realist" truthfulness attributed to each single document included in the collections and to every single information provided by the reference services with a wider and less demanding range of positive properties, however connected with the value of libraries' services and collections.[2] In this way, libraries could be satisfied (as in reality they have always done) to select authentic, reliable, and trusty documents, even if not all the information they convey is true in the classical sense, in order to build coherent, well balanced, and reasonably complete collections, although inevitably never, on the whole, completely truthful in the strict sense. And libraries could also renounce (as, indeed, it already happens) the utopian claim of providing, through their information services, completely truthful answers in the traditional sense, contenting themselves with ensuring that they are always (and it would already be an exceptional result) at least accurate, correct, and timely, in order to make the reference services providing them credible and authoritative.

5 Alethic Rights

First Antoniacomi (2018) and then Lor, Wiles, and Britz (2021) proposed – or at least hypothesized – to introduce among the deontological principles of librarians the respect of the six "alethic rights" theorized by D'Agostini in a series of publications begun in 2017 (D'Agostini 2017,[3] 2021; D'Agostini and Ferrera 2019). These rights can be interpreted in two ways: the "strong" sense, corresponding to the truth understood as *veritas* (the most common sense, relating to the "content" of the many individual propositions whose truth we continually affirm, deny or investigate) and the "weak" sense, corresponding to the truth understood as *aletheia* (the philosophical sense, relative to the very nature of what all these statements have in common, on which we reflect much more rarely) (D'Agostini and Ferrera 2019, 31–33).

The strong interpretation, suggested by the first formulation of the rights – on which both Antoniacomi (2018) and Lor, Wiles, and Britz (2021) were based, for chronological reasons – would require from libraries the complete truthfulness both of all the documents conserved in their collections and of all the information provided by their reference services. If alethic rights were to be understood in this way, they could not be adopted by libraries for the same reasons here listed in the third paragraph to argue against the centrality of the concept of truth in libraries, which I summarize here: 1) inapplicability to numerous types of documents owned by any type of library; 2) inapplicability to the entire collections of some types of libraries (such as national and academic ones); 3) inapplicability to most of the answers provided by the

2 A position similar to the one proposed in this article (inapplicability in libraries of the "classical" conception of truth, which should, in this context, be replaced with a more "tolerant" conception) is advanced by Labaree and Scimeca (2008). They analyze the difficulties encountered by realism, coherentism, and pragmatism and (instead of proposing, in their place, the application of alethic pluralism) present as a possible solution the adoption of a "historicist" theory of truth sketched by themselves.

3 The same issue of the journal also includes comments on alethic rights by Antonella Besussi, Alessandra Facchi, Maurizio Ferrera, and Elisabetta Galeotti, as well as answers and clarifications by D'Agostini herself.

reference services of any type of library; 4) the need, in the event of any application, of excessive resources compared to those actually available by libraries; 5) difficulty in managing documents that are regarded as not truthful; 6) conflict with intellectual neutrality; 7) absence of the duty of truthfulness in almost all the deontological codes of librarians.

On the contrary, in my opinion, it would be more consistent with the more mature reflections on alethic rights by D'Agostini (D'Agostini 2021; D'Agostini and Ferrera 2019), as well as more coherent with her previous works (D'Agostini 2002, 2011), a weak interpretation of these rights, which places the emphasis not so much on the possible *objective* existence of propositions that are truthful in an absolute sense (in every epoch, in every context, from any point of view and despite any interpretation) but rather on the *subjective* process of an incessant and never completed rational cognitive research that directs itself towards the truth in an indirect way, revealing and vanquishing, one after the other, the involuntary errors, the inevitable approximations and the deliberate lies that obscure its light (D'Agostini and Ferrera 2019, 30–32, 54).

After all, it is quite clear, comparing the first version of the alethic rights (transcribed by Lor, Wiles, and Britz 2021, 8) with the most recent one (which I transcribe below), that it makes a significant difference whether the "right to be informed truthfully" becomes the "right to be correctly informed" (AR1) and from the "right to be able to evaluate and seek truth" one passes to the "right to be in the conditions of evaluating the information one receives (having criteria and critical skills to select true contents)" (AR2):

> I – Communication and information
>
> AR1 – Right to be correctly informed (not being deceived, misled, or kept in the dark about relevant topics)
>
> AR2 – Right to be in the conditions of evaluating the information one receives (having criteria and critical skills to select true contents)
>
> II – Science and alethic institutions in general
>
> AR3 – Right to be acknowledged as reliable sources of truth, so not to suffer a credibility deficit
>
> AR4 – Right to have reliable epistemic institutions
>
> III – Culture
>
> AR5 – Right to have structures, norms and rules concerned with safeguarding these rights
>
> AR6 – Right to live in a culture in which the human need for truth is acknowledged, and there is general awareness about the role of truth in human life. (D'Agostini 2021, 516)

On this weak interpretation of alethic rights and the consequent "skeptical" use of the concept of truth, Lor, Wiles, and Britz (2021, 11) would also seem to agree when they write that

> because various institutions have laid claim to being bearers of the truth—truth as determined in terms of religious, political, and ideological dogma—claims to truth are often looked at with suspicion. This is not what is intended by the analysis offered in this article. An alethic culture does not decide what truth is to be believed, but inculcates in members of the society a clear awareness of the use of truth to equip them with the means of disentangling what is true from what is dogmatically declared to be true. Such a system does not rule out skepticism. On the contrary, the truth function is indispensable for inferring, doubting, and discussing. Establishing processes to arrive at the truth is vital for functioning democracies.

The weak interpretation of alethic rights thus makes it possible to avoid the "dictatorship of truth" (D'Agostini 2017, 10; Lor, Wiles, and Britz 2021, 9) typical of both theoretical dogmatism and political authoritarianism, which would claim to impose their pre-established and indisputable truths (after all *Pravda* in Russian means "truth"), whereas instead "democracy is 'government through discussion', and the discussion is nothing more than a comparison of beliefs, which can be and be considered true, false, not true" (D'Agostini and Ferrera 2019, 39). The libraries are so implicitly called into play, because their role in the complex social project of "education to truth" (D'Agostini and Ferrera 2019, 54) is not so much that of guarding (exclusively) the *truths* themselves, but rather that of documenting, of organizing, of protecting from destruction, alteration, falsification, and censorship and of making accessible to anyone all *beliefs*, leaving to other social subjects the equally important tasks of creating, comparing, hybridizing, and amending them, and of making them fairly fight each other and of decreeing the more or less temporary and unanimous winners.

The weak interpretation is also the one that takes greater account of the warning that the "six rights-values are progressively corrective, in the sense that the safeguarding of one serves to correct or limit the disproportionate observance of the precedents" (D'Agostini 2017, 14–15). As an example, DA1 (the right to be correctly informed and not to be deceived or misled) could, in isolation, also be interpreted as the guarantee that (at least) libraries, schools, universities, parliaments, courts, and other public institutions act so that citizens can access

exclusively, through them, information and documents that are completely and unquestionably truthful; but contextualizing it with respect to the set of all alethic rights it is instead more plausible to understand it as the requirement – less utopian – that such institutions do not deliberately deceive citizens themselves and, on the contrary, they inform them in a fair, transparent, complete, coherent, contextualized, and verifiable (i.e., with a single word, *correct*) way in the performance of their respective functions. This is what, for example, libraries do every time they prepare catalogs that adequately describe their collections, every time they build well-balanced collections that meet the information needs of their users and every time they provide competent and neutral assistance to their searches for information and documents. And, speaking of library collections, it is again the overall look at the six alethic rights as a whole that makes us understand how it is part of the education to truth (understood in a weak sense) also to understand when it makes no sense to demand truthfulness (understood in a strong sense) from all types of documents kept by libraries.

Once the weak interpretation of alethic rights has been opted for, there is still the question of whether it might be useful to add them to the values of librarians' professional ethics. In my opinion it would be better to avoid this, because in this context they can prove to be dangerous on the one hand and redundant on the other. First of all dangerous because, in the absence of explanations and contextualizations that are difficult to insert in synthetic and apodictic texts such as professional ethical codes, the risk of them being interpreted in a strong way would be very high. But even if it were possible to make it clear that the alethic rights of users that libraries must at least respect or even seek – limiting themselves to the narrow scope of their functions – to guarantee should be interpreted only in a weak sense, their inclusion in the codes themselves would still be useless, as it is redundant. On the first reason for this redundancy I agree with Froehlich (2021, 220) that such rights do not advance "the daily activities of librarians beyond what is already in the literature or on their daily agenda." If respecting, guaranteeing, and promoting alethic rights means educating or helping the users to seek, test, and recognize the truth, selecting the most reliable sources of information and distrusting less authoritative, less contextualized, and less coherent ones, then this is already part of both library services and their deontological codes. And if it means *correctly* informing the users, then both library practices and library standards already include the construction, maintenance, and development of catalogs, collections, signage, websites, and other tools for finding and using information and documents that are as free as possible of gaps, errors, inconsistencies, imbalances, censorship, and discrimination.

And if, in times of pandemics, fake news or other real or presumed natural or cultural disasters, it is believed that the standard balance between the various values that guide the professional ethics of librarians should be temporarily modified to give more weight, for example, to the duty of any organization, both public and private, not to jeopardize the health of its users, to the duty of any employer not to force its employees to risk getting sick in order not to lose their salary and to the duty of any national government to avoid excessive dissemination of opinions dangerous to public health, then there is already – in many ethical codes – the appropriate tool, namely the reference to the principle of social responsibility (Harger 2016, Soltani-Nejad et al. 2022). This principle requires librarians, as well as almost every other category of workers, not to respect only the values more specifically of their profession (such as, for librarians, especially that of freedom of access to information), but also the main general ethical values circulating in one's own community. And even in the absence of an explicit reference to social responsibility in the various deontological codes, it would still act, because all workers, in addition to referring to the rules of their professional corporation, must also take into account the rules of the organization they work for (which for librarians is almost always a public body) as well as those applicable to any citizen.

Clearly, social responsibility is a very insidious principle for any profession, because an excessive emphasis on general ethical principles risks crushing any specific professional ethical or technical principle that possibly opposes – or is accused of opposing, as Lor (2020) implicitly suggested about the Russian code – the well-being of the community, with obvious risks (for example, in our sector, for the information rights of minorities and individual citizens) (Ridi 2014). But if the social responsibility can already, on the one hand, argue in favor of temporary exceptions or attenuations of the regular rules and practices of libraries in the event of health or other emergencies and, on the other, jeopardize intellectual freedom, the privacy and other informational rights of their users, what need is there to add to the deontological codes a further principle such as the respect for alethic rights, which can turn out to be pleonastic – with respect to that of social responsibility (here is the second reason of redundancy) – and, if understood in a strong sense, even more dangerous?

6 Conclusions

No one who wants to communicate sensibly can completely dispense with the concept of truth, not even the followers of post-truth nor, much less, librarians. Nevertheless, truth is less central than one might, at first, think in library services and ethics, particularly in the context of the selection of acquisitions and of reference services, where concepts such as authenticity, reliability, correctness, and consistency are more usefully applicable. To reconcile the unavoidability of the concept of truth with the peculiarities of libraries, the epistemological theory of alethic pluralism of Wright (1992) and Lynch (2009) which makes possible different interpretations of truthfulness depending on the context can be particularly appropriate.

The alethic rights theorized by D'Agostini, however sensible and usefully applicable in other areas, are not, however, as effective as ethical pluralism in achieving this reconciliation, because – if understood in a strong sense – they produce various technical and ethical problems, while – if understood in a weak sense – they are redundant with respect to practices and norms already in force in libraries or, possibly, to a greater priority temporarily attributable to the value of social responsibility.

In any case, such as any reflection or remodeling relating to the role of truth in libraries you want to undertake, it is good to remember that, if you believe that every opinion "may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth [and] it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that […] the truth has any chance of being supplied" (Mill 1859, 95), then it is better to allow libraries to continue to carry out their historic task of conserving, organizing, and facilitating the listening to really *all* opinions.

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